

Parental Divorce and Child Mental Health: Accounting for Predisruption Differences

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Although evidence shows that the effects of divorce can be observed in advance of the actual event, there remains ambiguity over which aspects of child mental health are affected and why. This study analyzed two waves of data from a national survey of Canadian children (N = 4,474) to compare depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity at initial interview between children whose parents subsequently divorced and children whose parents remain married. Results confirmed significantly worse mental health problems among children whose parents later divorced. Differences were mostly attributable to greater socioeconomic disadvantage and more dysfunctional family processes among eventually divorcing households.

KEYWORDS *child mental health, family process, parental divorce*

One of the most powerful insights gained from studying divorce as a process has been to recognize that the effects of parental divorce on child well-being can be observed before the transition even occurs. Specifically, studies that prospectively track children in two-biological-parent households find that children whose parents divorced in the period prior to follow-up are in significantly worse mental health at initial interview compared to children whose parents remain married (Baydar, 1988; Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998; Doherty & Needle, 1991; Strohschein, 2005; Sun, 2001). This insight has changed the standard for

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investigating how divorce affects child well-being such that studies published since the mid-1990s routinely utilize a prospective research design with baseline measures of mental health to test whether divorce is associated with a change in child mental health. Even so, awareness of predivorce differences has done little to sway the focus of researchers, who continue to be drawn to the after-effects of divorce. As a result, there has been little systematic investigation of predivorce differences across neither a wide range of child mental health outcomes, nor a rigorous examination of the factors responsible for any observed differences.

The purpose of this article was twofold. Analyzing data from two waves of a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of Canadian children, I first compared differences in depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity at initial interview between children whose parents subsequently divorced and children whose parents remain married, then determined the relative contribution of socioeconomic factors and family processes to observed differences.

BACKGROUND

Divorce as a Process

More than the moment when a spouse departs the household, divorce encapsulates a process of uncoupling that begins well in advance of the event and has the potential to create ripples far into the future (Amato, 2000; Sun, 2001). As such, parents and their children often confront stressors that are specific to the different stages of the divorce process. For example, postdivorce stressors might include a drop in economic resources, greater parenting demands on the custodial parent, and relocation to a new home and neighborhood (Ge, Natsuaki, & Conger, 2006; South, Crowder, & Trent, 1998). In contrast, stressors prior to divorce are more likely to involve a sense of estrangement and growing dissatisfaction with the marital relationship (Amato, 2000; Devine & Forehand, 1996). Along the path to divorce, these feelings might be manifested and reinforced in parental interactions that are hostile and volcanic or emotionally detached and brittle. These interactions are distressing for parents (Gottman, 1998; Johnson & Wu, 2002), but also have consequences for child well-being (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Cummings & Davies, 2002). It is through the pathway of increasingly dysfunctional family relationships that the predisruption effects of divorce are thought to influence child mental health (Amato, 2010).

Although there are fewer than a dozen studies published on the topic, the research suggests that predivorce differences might exist across a wide spectrum of child mental health problems. Several studies have showed that levels of child depression at initial interview were significantly higher in children whose parents subsequently divorced relative to stably married parents

(Aseltine, 1996; Doherty & Needle, 1991; Strohschein, 2005), although a recent study found no differences (Robbers et al., 2011). Others reported higher levels of aggression and antisocial behavior among children whose parents later divorced compared to children whose parents remain married (Baydar, 1988; Block et al., 1986; Strohschein, 2005), with one study noting the association was true for girls only (Robbers et al.). One study found greater problems concentrating, confusion, and restlessness among children whose parents later divorced (Baydar, 1988), but another did not detect predisruption differences in hyperactivity (Kerr & Michalski, 2007).

General measures of child well-being also showed mixed findings. Studies that combine internalizing and externalizing behaviors into a single scale (Cherlin et al., 1998; Cherlin et al., 1991) or assess behavioral problems in school (Sun, 2001) did find predisruption differences; however, Shaw, Emery, and Tuer (1993) did not detect any predivorice differences using an even broader measure of global adjustment that encompassed behavioral problems, school functioning, and parent-child relations. The disadvantage of using these aggregate measures is that it prevents researchers from discerning whether some aspects of child well-being are more affected than others.

Inasmuch as researchers have yet to systematically identify which aspects of child mental health are vulnerable to the predisruption effects of divorce, there are equally large gaps in understanding their underlying causes. As already noted, family processes that both signal and propel parents toward marital breakdown represent an important explanation for why predisruption effects exist. That is, as the marital relationship deteriorates, interactions between family members can become increasingly fractious and disparaging, taking their toll on the mental health of parents and children. Thus, family conflict, marital satisfaction, and parental depression could all operate as family processes that play a central role in elevating child mental health problems prior to divorce.

But as compelling an explanation as this might seem, few researchers have empirically tested whether such family processes accounted for predisruption mental health problems in children, nor have they considered alternative hypotheses. One unexplored possibility, building on evidence that the risk for divorce is highest among those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1998), is that financial hardship poses an upstream threat to marital stability. That is, the family economic stress model contends that economic hardship increases parents' psychological distress and impairs marital relations and, in turn, influences child mental health problems (Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994). Consequently, the predisruption effects of divorce on child mental health could be more accurately attributed to structural factors such as poverty that subsequently erode

the quality and stability of family relations, with corresponding effects on child mental health.

For those studies that do find predivorce differences, only three studies have examined factors associated with predivorce differences in child mental health. Aseltine (1996) reported that adjusting for family conflict accounts for higher levels of depression in youth whose parents later divorce. Sun (2001) found that parental income and education do not account for observed predisruption differences in school behavior problems among adolescents, but that family process variables partially explained the association. Strohschein (2005) showed that adjusting for socioeconomic status and family processes fully accounts for predisruption differences in child depression and antisocial behavior. Socioeconomic status and family process variables were added simultaneously to the model, however, making it impossible to assess the independent contribution of these factors and to evaluate whether socioeconomic factors are mediated through family processes. In addition, each of these studies involved a relatively narrow age range, with children at initial interview restricted to students in Grades 9 through 11 (Aseltine, 1996), the 10th grade (Sun, 2001), or between the ages of 4 and 7 (Strohschein, 2005).

The preceding literature review identifies two gaps in knowledge about the predisruption effects of parental divorce on child mental health. First, there is a need to evaluate whether different aspects of child mental health are equally susceptible to the predisruption effects of parental divorce, and second, where predisruption differences in child mental health do exist, researchers must identify the underlying causes. The lack of consistent findings in previous research might stem from different ways of measuring child mental health, the limited age ranges of children, or differences in the length of time between initial and follow-up interview. This study represents a systematic investigation of these issues by using prospective data that makes use of three distinct scales of child mental health, covering a broad range of child ages, and a relatively short period of time between initial and follow-up interview.

METHODS

Sample

Designed to track the health and development of a nationally representative sample of Canadian children, the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) was launched in 1994 and has reinterviewed the original cohort of children every 2 years thereafter. Of 15,579 households identified in 1994 as having at least one dependent child under the age of 12, 13,439 households agreed to participate in the survey, for a response rate of 86.3%. In each household, up to four siblings were randomly selected,

producing a total sample of 22,831 children. Because of sample restrictions after the first cycle (children who participated in another national survey were selected into the first cycle of the NLSCY but not reinterviewed), the longitudinal sample includes 16,903 children of ages 0 to 11 in 1994, with 91.6% of these children participating in the second cycle of data collection (Statistics Canada 1998).

The analysis presented here is restricted to children participating in the first two cycles of the NLSCY, and includes children who, in 1994, were between the ages of 4 and 11 and lived in two-biological-parent married or common-law households ($n = 6,394$). Children who lost a parent through death or whose parents reported a prior history of marital instability were excluded ($n = 50$), reducing the sample to 6,344. A small amount of missing information on either the explanatory or dependent variables further reduced the sample ($n = 6,111$). To take into account that some households had multiple children in the survey, one child was randomly selected out of these households to produce a final sample of 4,474 children. Of these, 178 (4.0%) children experienced parental divorce in the period between initial interview in 1994 and follow-up interview in 1996.

Measures

The most knowledgeable parent, almost always the mother, answered a series of questions about the child's mental health status. This study uses three scales that assess child depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity. *Depression* is a seven-item scale that asks the parent to indicate whether it is *never*, *sometimes*, or *often* true (scored 0, 1, and 2 consecutively) that the child seems to be unhappy, sad, or depressed; is not as happy as other children; is too fearful or anxious; is worried; cries a lot; appears miserable, is unhappy, tearful, or distressed; and is nervous, high-strung, or tense. Responses are summed to produce a scale that ranges from 0 to 14, with higher scores denoting increasing levels of anxiety and depression. The scale exhibits acceptable levels of reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$). *Antisocial behavior* is a six-item scale that asks the parent to indicate whether, in the last 3 months, it is *never*, *sometimes*, or *often* true (scored 0, 1, and 2 consecutively) that the child cheats or tells lies; bullies or is cruel or mean to others; kicks, bites, or hits other children; threatens people; destroys his or her own things; and destroys things belonging to his or her family or other children. Responses are summed to produce a scale ranging from 0 to 12, with higher scores representing greater levels of antisocial behavior. The scale exhibits acceptable levels of internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). *Hyperactivity* is an eight-item scale that asks the parent to indicate whether it is *never*, *sometimes*, or *often* true (scored 0, 1, and 2 consecutively) that the child can't sit still, is restless, or is hyperactive; is distractible and has trouble sticking to any activity; fidgets; can't concentrate or pay attention for

long; is impulsive and acts without thinking; has difficulty awaiting his or her turn in games or groups; cannot settle into anything for more than a few minutes; and is inattentive. The scale exhibits acceptable levels of internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

To assess the predisruption effects of divorce, the focal variable in this analysis is a dummy variable that codes children whose parents separated or divorced in the interval between interviews in 1994 and 1996 as 1, and 0 otherwise.

Two measures of socioeconomic status and three measures of family process are included as explanatory variables that might account for predisruption differences in child mental health. *Education of the parent* is constructed as a series of dummy variables to compare those with less than high school, completed high school, and some postsecondary education with the reference category, completed postsecondary education. *Household income in 1994* is a categorical variable with five levels. Dummy variables are constructed to compare income in increments of \$20,000 with reported household income greater than \$80,000 acting as the omitted reference category. A continuous variable representing the number of members residing in the child's household, *household size in 1994*, operates as an adjustment for the effect of household income by recognizing that larger families require more resources to take care of the needs of its members.

Family process variables include marital satisfaction, parental depression, and family dysfunction. *Marital satisfaction in 1994* is the parent's rating of satisfaction with the marriage on a scale from 1 to 10, with higher ratings reflecting higher levels of marital satisfaction. *Family dysfunction in 1994*, is a 12-item scale from the general scale of the McMaster Family Assessment Device, which assesses whether the parent *strongly agrees*, *agrees*, *disagrees*, or *strongly disagrees* (assigned a value of 0–3, respectively) with statements about the level of trust, communication, and support within the family unit. The scale ranges from 0 to 36, with higher scores representing higher levels of family dysfunction and has acceptable levels of reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$). *Parental depression in 1994* is assessed using a subset of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, a well-known depression inventory (Radloff, 1977). Responses to 12 questions about the frequency of depressive symptoms in the past week including poor appetite, feeling disliked, depressed, and that everything they did was an effort, are categorized as *rarely or none of the time*, *some or a little of the time*, *occasionally or a moderate amount of the time*, and *most or all of the time* (scored 0–3, respectively). Items are summed to produce a scale ranging from 0 to 36, with higher values indicating increased levels of depression. The depression scale has acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

All models control for the gender of the child and the age of the child and parent at initial interview. The gender of the child is dummy coded (1 = male, 0 = female). Age of the child and parent are continuous variables

assessed in years. Nonlinear relationships for child age, specified with a quadratic term, were included and retained in models where they were found to be statistically significant.

Analysis

Analysis involves estimating a series of models, testing first whether there are predivorice differences in child mental health, then assessing the extent to which these differences are attenuated after sequentially adding socioeconomic status and family process variables to the models for child mental health.

Each of the child mental health measures exhibits a strong positive skew that violates distributional assumptions about the error terms and makes ordinary least squares regression inappropriate. A Poisson regression model, which belongs to the family of generalized linear models (McCullagh & Nelder, 1989), makes the distributional assumption that the conditional mean is roughly equivalent to its variance and relies on a log link function to ensure predicted values remain positive. Regression coefficients are thus interpreted as the logarithm of the ratio of the expected value before and after a one-unit change in an explanatory variable, with all other terms held constant.

All analyses are weighted to adjust for the unequal probabilities of selection into the survey and to take into account attrition between the first and second waves.

RESULTS

A comparison of the characteristics of children and their parents in households that remained intact and households that were divorced by 1996 is presented in Table 1. Parents who divorced were younger on average, as were their children. There were also differences in socioeconomic status between the two groups. Parents who divorced were more likely to have less than a high school education and less likely to have a postsecondary degree or diploma compared to continuously married parents. Similarly, parents who later divorced were more likely to report a household income in 1994 under \$40,000 and less likely to fall in the range from \$40,000 to \$59,999 compared to continuously married parents. There were also significant differences in the family dynamics of the two groups. Parents who later divorced reported higher levels of family dysfunction and parental depression and lower levels of levels of marital satisfaction relative to continuously married parents. A comparison of child mental health outcomes prior to any change in marital status indicates that children in subsequently divorced households exhibit significantly higher levels of antisocial behavior and

TABLE 1 Demographic and Mental Health Problems, for Children Whose Parents Remain Married and Children Whose Parents Are Divorced by 1996, National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1994–1996

	Parents remain married	Parents divorce by 1996
Child is male	52.9	47.8
Child age in 1994 (in years)	7.5 (2.3)	7.0* (2.1)
Parent age in 1994 (in years)	36.3 (5.3)	34.3*** (4.8)
Parent education		
Less than high school	14.6	21.8*
Completed high school	20.5	24.5
Some postsecondary	26.1	23.9
Completed postsecondary	38.8	29.7*
Household income in 1994		
Income less than \$20,000	4.6	11.0***
\$20,000–\$39,999	23.4	35.6***
\$40,000–\$59,999	32.6	20.8**
\$60,000–\$79,999	21.0	19.3
\$80,000 and higher	18.3	13.0
Household size in 1994	4.6 (1.1)	4.5 (0.9)
Marital satisfaction in 1994	8.5 (1.7)	6.5*** (2.5)
Family dysfunction in 1994	7.6 (5.0)	11.0*** (6.3)
Parental depression in 1994	4.0 (4.8)	6.1*** (5.8)
Child depression in 1994	2.3 (2.3)	2.6 (2.2)
Child antisocial behavior in 1994	1.0 (1.5)	1.6*** (1.7)
Child hyperactivity in 1994	4.3 (3.5)	5.5*** (3.3)
<i>N</i>	4,296	178

Note. Statistics are reported as means (*SD*) and proportions. *N* = 4,474.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

hyperactivity. Although in the expected direction, there are no significant differences in levels of child depression at initial interview between subsequently divorced and continuously married parents.

Table 2 presents Poisson regression models for the three measures of child mental health regressed on the age and sex of the child, the age of the parent, and parental divorce between 1994 and 1996. There were no significant gender differences in child depression, whereas male children exhibited significantly higher levels of hyperactivity than female children. Gender differences in antisocial behavior depended on age, such that the

TABLE 2 Poisson Regression Models for Predisruption Differences on Child Mental Health, National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1994

Variable	Depression		Antisocial behavior		Hyperactivity	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	1.11		-.73		1.62	
Child is male	-.02	.02	.47	.03***	.28	.01***
Child age in 1994	.04	.01***	-.11	.01***	-.02	.00***
Child is male × Child age			.05	.01**		
Child age squared					-.01	.00***
Parent age	-.01	.00***	-.03	.01***	-.01	.00***
Parental divorce by 1996	.13	.05*	.35	.07***	.28	.04***
Deviance	10659.68		8033.87		12814.04	

Note. *N* = 4,474.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

age-related decrease in child antisocial behavior was stronger for female children than for male children. Levels of child depression increased linearly with age, whereas hyperactivity decreased at an accelerating rate with each additional year in child age. Parents who are older on average reported significantly lower levels of depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity in their children. Adjusting for other terms in the model, children whose parents subsequently divorce exhibited significantly higher levels of depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity relative to children whose parents who were continuously married. For example, levels of antisocial behavior were 42% ($e^{.35} = 1.42$) higher on average for children whose parents later divorced compared to children whose parents remained married.

Results presented in Table 3 assess the extent to which predivorce differences in child mental health can be accounted for by socioeconomic status (Model 2) and family processes (Model 3). Parental education and income were strongly associated with child antisocial behavior and hyperactivity, but there were fewer associations with child depression. Adding socioeconomic status to the models reduced the coefficient for parental divorce for each mental health outcome, but in each model predisruption effects remained statistically significant.

Model 3 in Table 3 assesses the extent to which family processes at initial interview, adjusted for socioeconomic status, account for predivorce differences in child mental health. Marital satisfaction is not a significant predictor of any measure of child mental health, but high levels of family dysfunction and parental depression are associated with significantly higher levels of child depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity. Adjusting for family processes reduces the coefficient for parental divorce to nonsignificance for child depression. The coefficients for parental divorce are sharply attenuated in the models for child antisocial behavior and hyperactivity, but

TABLE 3 Poisson Regression Models Evaluating Predisruption Differences in Child Mental Health Adjusting for Socioeconomic Status (Model 2) and Family Processes (Model 3), National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1994

Variable	Depression				Antisocial behavior				Hyperactivity			
	Model 2		Model 3		Model 2		Model 3		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	1.52		1.34		.11		-.17		1.48		1.33	
Child is male	-.03	.02	-.01	.01	.56	.03***	.58	.03***	.28	.01***	.29	.01***
Child age in 1994	.04	.01***	.04	.01***	-.12	.01***	-.11	.01***	-.03	.00***	-.03	.01***
Child is male × Child age					.07	.01***	.06	.01***				
Child age squared									-.01	.00***	-.01	.00***
Parent age	-.01	.00***	-.01	.00***	-.03	.01***	-.03	.01***	.00	.00	.00	.00
Parental divorce by 1996	.12	.05*	-.02	.05	.32	.07***	.16	.07*	.21	.04***	.13	.04***
Parental education ^a												
Less than high school	.09	.03**	.02	.03	.37	.04***	.30	.04***	.36	.02***	.31	.02***
Completed high school	-.05	.03	-.08	.03**	.04	.04	.02	.04	.11	.02***	.09	.02***
Some postsecondary	-.03	.02	-.04	.03	.05	.04	.03	.04	.08	.00***	.07	.02***
Household income in 1994 ^b												
Less than \$20,000	.02	.05	-.09	.05	.48	.07***	.36	.07***	.08	.04*	.01	.04
\$20,000–\$39,999	.03	.03	-.03	.03	.23	.05**	.16	.05**	.06	.02**	.03	.02
\$40,000–\$59,999	.00	.03	-.03	.03	.26	.05***	.21	.05***	.02	.02	.00	.02
\$60,000–\$79,999	.04	.03	.01	.03	.31	.05***	.28	.05***	.08	.01***	.07	.02**
Household size in 1994	-.05	.01***	-.06	.01***	.03	.01*	.03	.01*	-.06	.01***	-.06	.01***
Marital satisfaction in 1994			-.01	.01			.00	.00			.00	.00
Family dysfunction in 1994			.02	.00***			.03	.00***			.02	.00***
Parental depression in 1994			.03	.01***			.03	.01***			.02	.00***
Δ –2 log likelihood	144.40		500.34		297.54		274.30		362.03		337.83	

Note. *N* = 4,474.

^aReference group is completed postsecondary degree or diploma. ^bReference group is household income greater than \$80,000.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

each remains statistically significant. For child antisocial behavior, adding family process variables attenuates some of the effects of socioeconomic status, although both household income and parental education remain statistically significant. The same holds true for child hyperactivity, except that the coefficients representing reported household income below \$40,000 are no longer significant after adjusting for family process variables.

Based on research that inconsistently points to child gender as a moderating variable (Baydar, 1988; Doherty & Needle, 1991), I tested but failed to find gender-specific predisruption effects for any of the three child mental health outcomes. There was also no evidence of age-specific predisruption effects. Consequently, the models in this study represent the best fitting models.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine what types of child mental health problems are elevated in the period prior to parental divorce, and then to evaluate the relative contribution of socioeconomic status and family dynamics to observed differences. In terms of the first research question, the results suggest each of three domains of child mental health evaluated in this study show evidence of predisruption effects. That is, after adjusting for child gender and age of the child and parent, children whose parents divorced between 1994 and 1996 exhibited significantly higher levels of depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity at initial interview compared to children whose parents remained married in 1996. These findings replicate what has been reported by others using various measures of child mental health (Aseltine, 1996; Baydar, 1988; Block et al., 1986; Cherlin et al., 1998; Cherlin et al., 1991; Doherty & Needle, 1991; Strohschein, 2005; Sun, 2001). The results of this study do not correspond with those of Kerr and Michalski (2007), who reported no predisruption differences in hyperactivity, nor with those of Robbers and colleagues (2011), who did not find predivorce differences in depression; however the very young age of children in these studies (4 and 5 in the former and 3 in the latter) might play a role. That is, measures of mental health at this age might not be reliable.

Turning to the question of whether socioeconomic status and family process variables account for predisruption differences, the results allow for two main conclusions. First, the results show that adjusting for both socioeconomic status and family process variables accounts for all predisruption differences in child depression, and most but not all differences in antisocial behavior and hyperactivity. That is, higher levels of child depression, antisocial behavior, and hyperactivity preceding marital dissolution occur mainly because eventually divorcing households are more socioeconomically disadvantaged and have more dysfunctional family processes at initial interview compared to continuously married households.

The second conclusion to be drawn from examining the contribution of socioeconomic status and family process variables to predisruption differences in child mental health is that the effects of socioeconomic status on predisruption differences in child antisocial behavior and hyperactivity are both direct and mediated through family processes. Specifically, the coefficients for income and education in the model for antisocial behavior are attenuated, but remain highly significant after adjusting for family processes, whereas for hyperactivity, it is mainly the effect of parental education that persists after adjusting for family processes. For child depression, only the effect of low education is significant, and it disappears once family processes are added to the model. These findings align with the family economic stress model, which posits that the relationship between economic hardship and child mental health is mediated by family processes such as marital quality and parental depression. In the context of this article, it suggests that economic hardship operates as an upstream factor that contributes to marital instability and child mental health problems.

Pong and Ju (2000) showed that the risk of dropping out of school for divorced children is due not just to a decline in income following divorce, but also to greater economic disadvantage prior to marital dissolution. They made the point that economic hardship is already an enduring feature in these children's lives, with parental divorce serving only to reshuffle them once again into poverty. In a similar vein, researchers now need to move forward to reveal how the dynamic links among economic disadvantage, family processes, and parental divorce influence child mental health. As demonstrated in this study, predivorce experiences play an essential role in predicting divorce and in influencing child outcomes, and therefore are as deserving of attention as divorce itself. Indeed, it is increasingly apparent that studies that focus on the consequences of a divorce event without considering circumstances in the child's life prior to divorce will not only overstate the effects of divorce on child outcomes, but will mislead us into thinking that divorce is the only, or the most critical, determinant of child well-being.

One limitation of this study is that all of the information used in the analysis presented here comes from the parent. The problem of shared methods variance emerges when the perceptions of a single informant who might respond similarly to different measures might lead to more significant results than there really are. One solution would be to obtain child-reported measures of mental health from the children themselves; however, in the NLSCY, self-reported measures of mental health are restricted to children between the ages of 10 and 11. The goal of this article was to encompass as wide an age range as possible, which precluded using information from an alternate source. Studies that compare the perspectives of children and their parents are sorely needed, and in particular, should be used to address whether predisruption effects are more visible in externalizing than internalizing behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Researchers who take a process-oriented approach to divorce routinely use predivorce measures of child mental health as a baseline for evaluating changes in mental health following divorce, but seldom investigate predisruption differences as noteworthy and important in their own right. This study addresses this oversight by showing that children exhibit a range of different mental health problems in the period leading up to divorce and that these differences are mostly attributable to lower socioeconomic status and more dysfunctional family processes in households that subsequently break up. As such, these findings stand as a reminder to researchers that our understanding of the effect of divorce on child outcomes remains incomplete unless we attend to what is happening in children's lives in the period leading up to divorce.

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